

THE EARLY HISTORY OF EIKRIDGE LANDING

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Required for initiation into Maryland
Beta Chapter of Tau Beta Pi

11/26/37

SUMMARY

Nine and one-half miles from Baltimore on the Baltimore-Washington Highway, Elkridge still stands, but in the desolation of its departed glory. It is a skeleton of its former self. It was prosperous before Baltimore was begun. In its Halcyon days it was the commercial rival of Annapolis. Ships from England came up to its docks. The water power of the upper Patapsco had been discovered and harnessed, and mills grew up along its banks for miles. Rolling roads reached down to the busy landing from many directions and over them the tobacco hogsheads were handrolled to the ships' sides. These ships that first bore away tobacco, later bore also iron ore, lumber, grain and flour.

Just before the Revolution several things happened to crush Elk Ridge. Baltimore came into being on a more accessible and dependable water-front. The cargoes went that way. The very tide sensed the futility of driving so far inland; turned back before it reached the landing. The history of old Elk Ridge since then has been one of abandonment and decay.

As the Patapsco narrows, before Baltimore, it turns westward. It loses its tide in another half-dozen miles, and its brine is washed out of it by the sweet waters from its highland reaches. In the eighteenth century there were twenty miles of ferreting tides in Patapsco. They reached lazily across the flatlands until stopped near the mouth of a noble gorge. And just there stood Elk Ridge Landing.

The history of Elk Ridge Landing goes back to the founding of Howard County itself. Bordered by the rocky profile of the Patapsco on the north and by the rich levels of the Patuxent on the south, so situated was Howard County with a history that covered two centuries and yet it had no historian to cover it. Many have heard stories of when this western section of the Mother County, Anne Arundel, was erected into Howard District, but none recorded the struggles of the early pioneer settlers who made it that way.

The Patuxent was known as early as the St. Mary's. The Patapsco was first explored by Capt. John Smith who called it the Bolus River because its red banks reminded him of "Bole Armoniach" which meant a red clay, so colored by iron in the soil, a fact which made history in Elkridge later. Up these Rivers and along the blind paths, blazed by Indian hunters, came the lowland settlers to the Ridge of Elks, to build their cabins by the side of the Indian wigwams.

Land grants were made to Charles Carrol (10,000 acres), to Thomas Browne, Benjamin Hood, Richard Snowden, Colonel Henry Ridgely, Richard Warfield, John Dorsey, Col. Edward Dorsey who made surveys, all of which was before 1700. A quarter of a century later, this whole area was occupied by the sons and grandsons of these pioneer surveyors.

The Ridge of Elks had become the summer resort of fashion. It was so popular in fact as to cover the whole territory, from Laurel to Elk Ridge Landing, to Ellicott City, to Clarksville, and back to Laurel.

Thomas Browne's sons, Richard Snowden's sons, Colonel Ridgely's grandsons, Richard Warfield's grandsons, John Dorsey's grandsons, and Col. Edward Dorsey's sons all were located upon the excellent tobacco lands of the Ridge.

In 1683, the Assembly passed "An Act for Advancement of Trade" which aimed to encourage the creation of towns, principally sea ports for trading purposes.

At the northern terminus of Elk Ridge, overlooking in picturesque beauty the gorges of the Patapsco on the north, and spreading out to the east in a water way which no longer exists, was early erected a Port of Entry to accomodate the tobacco growers of Upper Anne Arundel.

In 1696 the Assembly passed an act which caused "4 Rolling Roads to be marked and cleared for the Rolling of Tobacco to the Ports of Anne Arundel County." This is the origin of the road known today as the Rolling Road.

Saplings and branches of trees were laid on the roads so that the hogsheads of tobacco should not get stuck in the mud in wet weather, and they were called "corduroy" roads. A strong pole was passed thru the center of the hogsheads, leaving ample margin at either end at which a man or two could walk. This tobacco was transported thru very hilly country, and must have been a very difficult journey. The hogsheads were not always moved by man, however, as horses and oxen were often used.

The sailors of the ships sent over by London merchants for tobacco were required to load it at the door of the shipper, which was

easy enough at the beginning when each plantation had its own wharf at its own door so to speak.

As colonization increased and new plantations were taken up further inward, away from the navigable rivers, this regulation became an increasing hardship, because of the enormous distances over which they were obliged to roll tobacco in Maryland.

The London merchants added their complaints to those of the sailors, so in 1727, the Assembly passed an act requiring (under penalty of 100 pounds of tobacco) that within five days of receiving a written request all persons paying out tobacco should roll their own hogsheads to a convenient landing.

This law relieved the merchants of having their sailors gather up and roll the tobacco to their ships from places sometimes as far as twenty-five miles from Elk Ridge landing.

In 1733 the Assembly passed a law for erecting a town at and about the Landing. The town was to be called Jansen Town to consist of forty lots laid out on a tract of thirty acres according to the plan for laying out Baltimore town. This town was never laid out but failure to do so did not in any way interfere with the trade at Elk Ridge Landing. It is believed that this town was never laid out because the necessary water frontage could not be obtained. This sidelight was given by Mr. Boswell, an old resident, and present postmaster of Elkridge.

Many abuses had crept into the tobacco trade - short weight, crumpled leaves, etc. - so that another act was passed in 1747.

It was entitled "An Act to Amend the Staple of Tobacco" and provided for a wharf, a scales, a warehouse and an inspector at each port of entry. At that time it was indeed a "port of entry", for it was a lusty rival of Annapolis.

In 1763 there were 1,695 hogsheads of tobacco, more than half the crop in Anne Arundel County, inspected at Elk Ridge, and during the Revolution it was at the height of its usefulness. The great Northern and Southern Post Road ran through it. Into this highway other "rolling roads" entered.

Woe unto Elkridge for the river with its ten-foot channel to the bay and its ocean-crossing ships, the very river which made Elkridge a place of importance, began now, treacherously, to steal away the eminence which it had brought.

As early as the middle of the 18th century, planters were complaining of the river bed filling and the difficulty with which the ships made their private landings and that the captains of the same ships, no matter how much they were reprimanded, would throw overboard in it, as they came to port, their ballast of sand and the like.

In 1853 a law was passed to "prevent injuring the navigation to Baltimore Town and to the Inspection House at Elk Ridge Landing on Patapsco River." In effect it said, "No earth, sand or dirt was to be thrown into or put upon the beach or shore of the Patapsco or any navigable branch thereof below high water mark except when secured by stone wall or dove-tailed log-pen from washing into the river, under a penalty of five pounds, current money."

In the meantime the iron industry had been flourishing in the vicinity of Elkridge. Iron ores and mines were plentiful along the shores of the Patapsco. Consequently, forges and furnaces began to appear, and England, to choke the infant industry, of which she was jealous, offered a bounty on all iron imported to the colony.

In 1719 the Maryland Assembly, to rebuke this childish act

and to stimulate the iron industry, ordered that a grant of one hundred acres should be given to everyone who should erect a forge or furnace in Maryland. Excellent iron ore mines and forges surrounded the landing, doubtless one result of this act.

The most important was the development by Caleb Dorsey and his brother, Edward. Mines were opened, forges built, lands ten miles in extent were bought or surveyed, furnaces were erected and ships were sent laden with the output to the English markets.

Forges he built were Avalon and further south was Hockley, perhaps after the name of his boyhood farm, and a third, Belmont, near his home, which altho built in 1738 still stands today. This house was built of English brick brought over in his own ships. The iron business was increasing by leaps and bounds and his brother built still another forge at Curtyss's Creek works.

The Avalon furnace was the first mill in America to manufacture ten penny nails, the nails used before that time being hammered out of wrought iron.

These old furnaces for producing pig iron were essentially crude. They were built of stone and brick, the blast being furnished by a curious circular bellows which was operated by a water wheel and very little machinery or gearing was used. So crude were the works that a water wheel was necessary for each set of bellows and hammer; often one forge building contained several water wheels.

The Avalon Iron Works was the most successful of all of early Elkridge's works. In it were manufactured iron plates, bars and nails. During the revolution it manufactured many guns for the defense of the country. As late as 1868 a small steamer, the "Great Western",

plied up the Patapsco, the owners of the works spent a great deal of money in straightening and deepening a channel up the river as far as B & O's Thomas viaduct. They then purchased a small tug and a number of scows for their work. Pig and scrap iron were loaded on the scows at Baltimore for Avalon and manufactured iron hauled back and loaded on the scows to be taken to the city. This work was completely broken up by a freshet in 1868 which completely destroyed the wharves and channel.

Prior to the revolution the land so suited to the raising of tobacco was becoming poor and the planters were planning to desert their lands for Kentucky and other tobacco lands. However, the advent of the Ellicotts showed them by use of fertilizer they could convert their lands to wheat fields. Thus the plantations that were once supplying tobacco to England began to supply wheat for neighboring grist mills but primarily the mill of Andrew Ellicott. Another export was added to that of Elk Ridge Landing.

When the Revolution came and with that the English factors who had been in charge of the shipments of tobacco to England returned to their mother country.

The trade became diverted to a new port, the town of Baltimore, not so old but growing mightily and reaching out greedy hands in every direction for trade.

A town with warehouses and shippers of its own, some native Americans, some Scotch and Irish and German settlers who were keen enough to see the future that lay here.

A town that once the revolution was over and the seas were free had ships sailing to ports all over the world. Truly a more formidable rival than Annapolis had ever been.

Also the law against throwing out of ballast had not stemmed the dwindling tide of the river upon which Elkridge depended for its life.

Silt brought down by freshet from the rapidly clearing farm lands above added its menace to the sand and gravel ballast.

The willows began to spring up, began their stealthy march upon the water and the once busy port of Elkridge landing passed into history leaving but meagre data of its once busy mart. Today there are no relics of its taverns for the accomodation of the drivers; of its stables for the keep of their horse; of its tobacco warehouse wherein were deposited the immense hogsheads of tobacco and later flour from the successful mills of the Ellicott brothers; of the wharves; of the scales provided by the act of Assembly no vestige remains.

J. D. Warfield in "Founders of Anne Arundel and Howard Counties" says "Elk Ridge landing could have had no artists, else they would have left a picture of the impromptu gatherings at our early Elk Ridge Landing; of the vessels; of the wharves; of the old houses now lost to us." Some landmarks, however, remain. Its founder built his house upon a rock upon a hill which the floods cannot destroy. Altho his forge Avalon has been washed away, his home "Belmont" stands as a monument to the deceased town and to the "rich iron merchant of Elk Ridge".

The history of Elk Ridge landing can be narrowed down to a single question, i.e. Will Baltimore or Elkridge be the important city of Maryland?

Elkridge, as it is now known, answered the question when ^{fate}~~it~~ pushed the waters of the Patapsco away.

Plat of early Elkridge Landing. Mr. Boswell, present postmaster said that Old Post Road is now Main Street. The other roads were have since been renamed and he wasn't sure which ones were still standing.



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